

EDITORIAL

Viva la evolution! Specialized adaptation and the Medical Library Association's ongoing commitment to the teaching and learning roles of health sciences librarians

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I have a community garden plot with four raised beds that I tend with a reasonable degree of care. Despite record heat this past July (2012), my garden exploded, and there is a life-and-death battle going on in the beds between pumpkin, tomato, and cucumber. My money is on pumpkin; its fleshy leaves first shade, then starve the other plants for light.

My co-gardeners sometimes stop by to comment on the fitness of my pumpkin plant. One talkative visitor offered an intriguing bit of kind, but somewhat irrelevant, advice once while I was watering. She suggested that I always smile at any crows I see, as they have photographic memories. The subtextual message being, "Be kind to them, or else..."

Setting aside visions of *The Birds* and a Hitchcockian-tortured Tippi Hedren, crow communities are featured in a book I have been reading and reflecting on this summer since the end of the association's annual meeting, held this year in Seattle, WA. *The Neighborhood Project: Using Evolution to Improve My City, One Block at a Time* (New York, NY: Little, Brown, 2011) was written by Binghamton University Professor David Sloan Wilson, who also wrote *Evolution for Everyone*. In *The Neighborhood Project*, Wilson, a distinguished professor of biology and anthropology, describes his efforts to establish an initiative to raise the fortunes of his city in the southern tier of New York State, applying the lessons of evolutionary biology to "make the world a better place," starting with Binghamton. I am originally from Buffalo, but I have family in Cortland, a scant forty or so miles north of that "SUNY" town.

My background is in anthropology and journalism, but I have an

interested amateur's appreciation of biology and natural history and also love a good metaphor. I have therefore been appreciating Wilson's book, in which he does a fine job of describing how the "hammer blows of natural selection" either positively or negatively position species for success.

Readers of the *Journal of the Medical Library Association* (JMLA) may recall that the metaphor of natural selection and adaption to new and changing conditions featured prominently in the seminal Janet Doe Lecture by Robert Braude, AHIP, FMLA, presented at MLA '96 and published in the JMLA as, "On the Origin of a Species: Evolution of Health Sciences Librarianship" [1]. In this terrific article, which I unhesitatingly nominated as my favorite JMLA/BMLA article of all time, Braude stated:

We have achieved our current position, precarious as it may seem, through our flexibility, the ability to respond to changes in the way information is produced, packaged, and distributed. We have coupled this flexibility with an overriding concept of service, which, I maintain, continues to distinguish us from other information technology professionals. And we will continue to evolve because our strategy is still effective. As we seek out new knowledge and skills through both basic and continuing education, we will respond to these changing conditions. [2]

Successful adaptation owes a great deal to making the right change at the right point in time, my words for describing the consequences of path dependence. Braude made many good points in his article, but the notion that stuck with me and on which I continue to reflect was the idea that as a profession we have been collectively aware and astute enough to "turn to education as our natural selection strategy." In

my own words, we have used our skills as teachers and learners to create intellectual experiences, opportunities, and interventions to intentionally modify our practice in a collective act of specialized adaptation over time and in response to changes in our environment, advancing the profession and advancing our survival.

My experience during my 2011/12 presidential year can be compared to a field study, a key element of the research methodology of the evolutionary biologist. I had the great opportunity and benefit to visit a number of chapters for their annual meetings. In both the Southern and South Central Chapters, I observed the very careful tending of new and student members. The chapters evinced a very strong ethos of empowerment and opportunity for students, a terrific approach to succession planning and sustainability for the profession. This struck me as a potentially very successful survival strategy for our community of practice, a "social engineering" approach to the evolution of health sciences librarianship targeting the next generation, wherein social engineering is understood as the application of social practices to address a specific problem or condition—in this instance, the enculturation of new librarians.

A priority for my presidential year, and which I am committed to advancing, is the notion of a Medical Library Association (MLA) Academy of Teaching Excellence (MATE). The decision to advance MATE was a highly intentional act of social engineering, leveraging the bully pulpit of the presidency to enhance and ensure the sustainability of what I believe to be the association's most significant and signature assets, our approach to credentialing and education.

The idea for MATE occurred to me after I attended a string of professional conferences in the fall

of 2010 and heard on several occasions that while practicing health sciences librarians are frequently engaged in teaching and instruction, there often is very little preparation for that role in the course of obtaining the master of library science (MLS) or similar “terminal” degree. Librarians are expected to pick up the necessary skills on the job, despite the fact that we often have in our libraries highly specialized positions focusing on teaching. Sometimes, those jobs require that the incumbent have an additional degree or education coursework, but that is often not the case. I had been hearing that sentiment for years and years and wondered if now was the time to do something about it.

As our profession evolves into one where our practitioners are increasingly working in embedded contexts and in partnerships with faculty and learners of all sorts—be they health professions students, patients, public health workers, or whomever—how are we encouraging the development and enhancement of teaching skills within our community of practice?

Thinking about all this, I was reminded of my own role when I worked at the Arizona Health Sciences Library at the University of Arizona, where I worked with a cohort of Dean’s Scholars from the College of Medicine. These were teaching faculty from the school who had a passion for instruction and who “came up” through the rigors of obtaining their professional degrees without formal instruction in teaching. These Dean’s Scholars were brought together to think about their teaching and to engage in learning projects, including research, in order to improve their teaching practice.

When I came to the University of Colorado, I was introduced to faculty who were establishing an academy for teaching excellence with similar goals—that of bringing together a cohort of exceptional teachers and giving them time and space to reflect on, research, and enhance their teaching practice. Further, this academy is assisting others who teach to improve their

practice. And so, I thought, why not an academy for MLA to provide a focal point for improving our teaching practice?

The vision sustaining MATE is to bring together from across the association our “master teachers”—and I know that term needs to be defined. I see them as the MLA members who have shown, through their demonstrable accomplishments, true mastery in terms of breadth and depth of skills for teaching and instructing. The hope is that these individuals will make themselves available to the membership as mentors and consultants for those in the profession who teach and who wish to improve their practice. Further, I see the academy as a service where master teachers can identify and support the adoption of best practices in terms of teaching and instruction for the variety of learners with whom we as health information professionals interact. Considering this vision in practical terms, members of the academy could collectively solicit, vet, and provide access to sample curricula, rubrics for assessment, learning objects, and pedagogical approaches in service to the teaching membership.

The social engineering aspect related to the academy idea is the need to ensure that MLA continues to support a skilled and competent cadre of instructors for its continuing education (CE) program. MATE is not seen as an MLA CE program, but I do see it as supporting the CE enterprise by helping members who wish to teach MLA CE attain the necessary skills and support to be the best possible instructors. This is not a criticism of our current instructors—they are consistently exceptional! But rather, it is really intended in the spirit of the other academies noted herein, to support health sciences librarians who are committed to and passionate about teaching to evolve in their practice.

During the year leading up to my presidency, I asked MLA members what they thought of the academy idea, and I received nearly universal support and encouragement to

advance. I subsequently brought a motion to the Board of Directors, and a task force was established to consider the feasibility of the idea—not to establish MATE but rather to consider the vision, goals, stakeholders, governance issues, and resources needed to establish such an enterprise. This past year, I was able to bring together a phenomenal team of “master teachers” from across MLA and the country to consider with me, a liaison to the board, and headquarters staff all those issues, all of which need to be considered to launch such an endeavor. Our group is still working on recommendations to the board, but I am optimistic that the idea is a smart survival strategy when we consider how we wish to evolve as a profession.

I am certainly not the first MLA leader to champion our teaching mission. Braude kiddingly referred to the “beak of the librarian” in his Doe lecture as a metaphorical signifier of the uncanny ability of the health sciences librarian to use teaching and learning as means of specialized adaptation. The Doe Lecture by Ana D. Cleveland, AHIP, in 2010 encouraged us to recognize the necessity of interdisciplinary and collaborative relationships and further the merging of health care, library, and information sciences into the basic building blocks in the education of health information professionals [3]. Julie J. McGowan, AHIP, FMLA, encouraged health sciences librarians to apply their teaching and learning skills to evolve attitudes and habits in the medical education system “to create a truly information-literate physician” [4]. Fred W. Roper, AHIP, FMLA, in yet another Doe Lecture, from 2005, assessed MLA’s professional development program and succinctly stated that:

The association’s challenge is to continue to develop creative and innovative programs, to continuously review and revise existing programs, and to have the vision and vitality to maintain a viable program that will provide the membership with the knowledge and

skills needed to function effectively now and in the future. [5]

Writing about the educational roles of health sciences librarians, Jocelyn A. Rankin and Jean Williams Sayre, both of whom sadly left us way, way too soon, reminded us nearly twenty years ago that:

As educators, librarians need to anticipate instructional needs, look for the “teachable moments,” work with other professionals to provide effective learning experiences for students and practitioners, and find opportunities to integrate library education into existing curricula and hospital practice and procedures. A librarian who can face uncertainty and challenge will not only adapt to the changes presented by the current environment but will succeed as an effective information provider and educator. [6]

I believe that the MATE initiative is consistent with these visions of the role of the health sciences librarian and is an example of our

metaphorically picking up and whacking away with the hammer of natural selection on behalf of the profession.

And so, *viva la evolution!* That is a slogan I saw emblazoned on the chest of a professorial type at my local farmer’s market this summer. Balancing a bag of peaches, some green beans, and a Rocky Ford melon, I pulled out my precious Droid 2, searched, and found that the T-shirt is part of a marketing campaign for the journal *Science* from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). In the spirit of partnership and collaboration with other professions and their associations, I suggest that the slogan is equally applicable to the marketing of the teaching and learning roles of the health sciences librarian.

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